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Denise Nicole Green
Cornell University, dng22@cornell.edu

Susan B. Kaiser
University of California, Davis, sbkaiser@ucdavis.edu

Kyra Streck
Cornell University, ks887@cornell.edu

Kelsie Nicole Doty
Cornell University, knd36@cornell.edu

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“I Knew the Mechanics of Hip”: Fashioning Bodies in the Works of Joni Mitchell, 1968 - 1979

Denise Nicole Green, Cornell University, Susan B. Kaiser, University of California – Davis,
Kyra Streck and Kelsie Doty, Cornell University

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Purpose & Significance: Since the late 1960s and 1970s, Joni Mitchell has been best known for her remarkable music: her voice, compelling lyrics, and unusual guitar tunings, all of which conveyed sentiments of her generation and have remained relevant to later generations. Although her lyrics and album covers are replete with references to fashion, textiles, dress, and appearance, they have not been critically analyzed in relation to her status as a cultural icon. The fashion industry is clearly aware of this status, as evidenced, for example, by her inclusion in a 2015 Yves St. Laurent campaign. In our study, we ask: (1) What does Mitchell’s music convey about fashion, textiles, dress, and appearance? (2) What fashion philosophies and themes are found in her vocal and visual arts? To answer these questions, we completed a discourse analysis of Mitchell’s lyrics, alongside a visual analysis of her album art. By studying the period of 1968 – 1979, our research captures the epoch of her greatest radio influence and record sales, and identifies the messages and fashion philosophies threaded throughout her songs and artwork.

Context: Mitchell has described herself as a philosopher; therefore, we examined her songs as philosophies. Understanding Mitchell’s biography is also important for contextualization. From childhood onward, Mitchell was fascinated with dress: “I drew clothes. I was going to be a fashion designer” (Yaffe 2017: 12). In grade 7, Mitchell met Mr. Kratzmann, her English teacher, and he encouraged her to write as if she were painting “in her own blood.” As she developed her artistic skills—both visual and written—Mitchell wrote a high school newspaper column, *Fashions & Fads*, and claimed, “I started fads and I stopped them. I knew the mechanics of hip” (Yaffe 2017: 23-25). Fashion and textiles enriched her ability to paint with words.

Theory and Methods: Critical discourse analysis was employed as the theoretical framework and guiding methodology. In this approach, discourse is considered dynamic—that is, an ongoing process of producing cultural meanings through language and visual culture, which mediate worldviews, inform subjectivities, and reveal networks of power (Lazar 2010). We analyzed two sets of primary sources: first, the lyrics of Mitchell’s songs and second, her album art. The lyrics were analyzed for themes and researchers coded independently for two categories: (1) specific mention of textiles, dress, appearance, appearance perceptions, body parts, and etc.; (2) thematic representations of identities, place, and ideologies. Researchers then reconciled their analyses.

Results: As Mitchell told Cameron Crowe of *Rolling Stone* in 1979, “Staying the same is boring.

And change is interesting.” Change is, of course, the only constant in the fashion system. Mitchell’s fascination with change intersects with her lyrical descriptions of bodies, textiles, and garments in interesting ways that themselves change over time. While her first two albums have the greatest array of textile references and carefully described garments (e.g., “taffeta patterns,” “paisley,” “gingham,” etc.), the later albums transform thick description into complex critique. She begins to sing about change across time and space, sometimes in the form of destruction (“hole in her stockings,” “[beauty] fading in everyone’s hands,” “watching your hairline recede”), but more often through contradictions of appearance (“impossibly gentle hands, [with] blood-red fingernails,” “Photo Beauty gets attention, then her eye paint’s running down”). *Blue* has the fewest references to the fashioned body, while later albums like *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, have the most references to body parts. The types of references shift from description to interpretation—often through metaphor—and eventually turn to the appearances of others as a form of social commentary. We argue that Mitchell’s tendency toward social consciousness is a thread that carries across the rich textile and clothing descriptions in the first two albums to more interpretive and critical examination of fashioned bodies after 1970. She conveys an ambivalent relationship to fashion: from the intimated ephemerality of bodily modifications (i.e., “red lipstick glistening,” “eyelids painted green,” “body oiled and shining”) to critiques of the growing superficiality of the fashion and beauty industries (“vain promises on beauty jars,” and “beauty parlor blonds with credit card eyes”).

Mitchell considered herself “a painter first, and a musician second,” and thus put significant consideration into her self-representational album art. Travel and place are themes that cut across both: in addition to lyrics about bodies modified by place, she often integrated her image into the landscapes depicted and blurred the line between foreground and background, body and landscape. For example, in the *Clouds* cover, Mitchell mixed the paint on her face to mimic the hues in the sunset, and blended her face into the sky. In the *Hejira* album Mitchell collaged 14 photographs, and the cover featured Mitchell with a driver’s view of a two-lane highway superimposed onto her body. Throughout her album art, Mitchell converged body and place.

Conclusion: “Songs are like tattoos” sang Mitchell in her album *Blue*. Through song and artwork, Mitchell highlighted the critical role of fashion, textiles, and body modifications as filling “empty space”—in other words, the ambivalent integration of body, fashion, and place. Her songs remind listeners that like tattoos, fashions degrade and fade; they transform but their soul cannot be preserved forever because they are of the moment and of a particular time, space, and lived body. Through song, listeners are reminded of different textiles, garments, accessories, and surface decoration, and these, by the late 1970s, eventually become a metaphor of social relationships, anxieties, and hopes.

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